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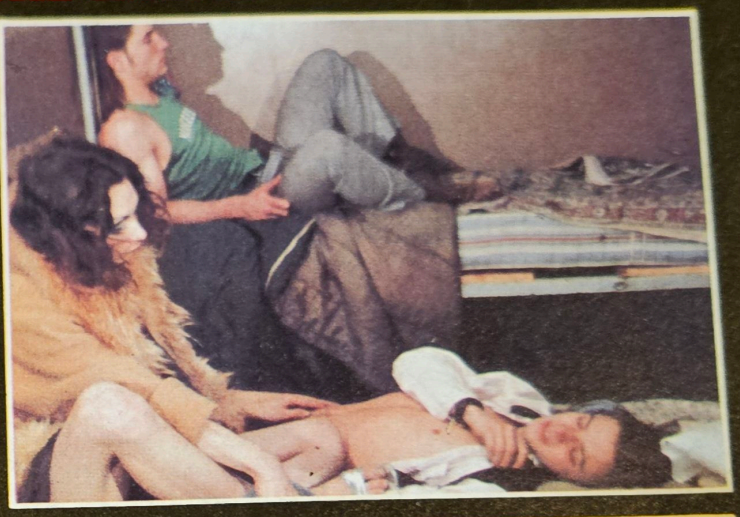

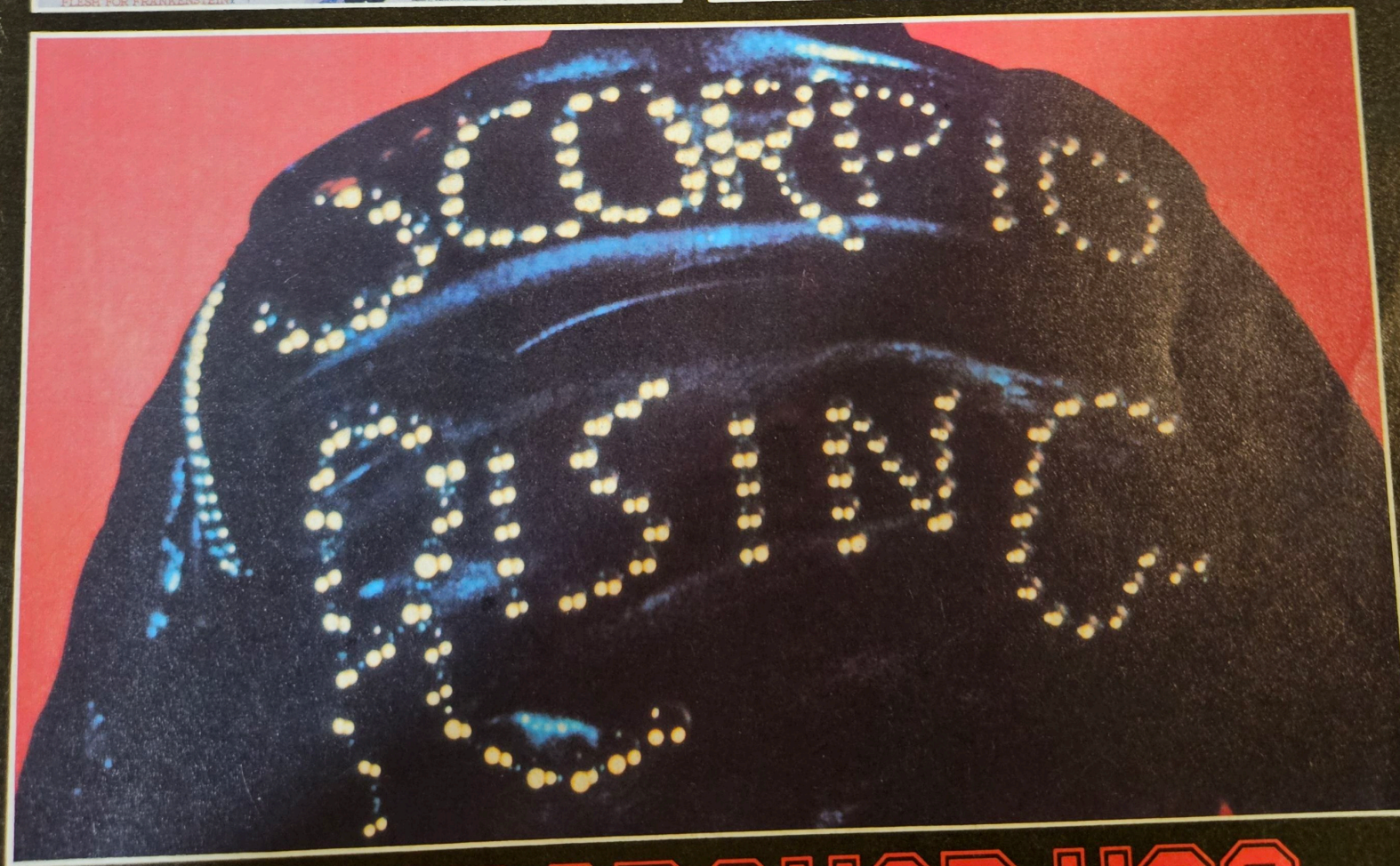

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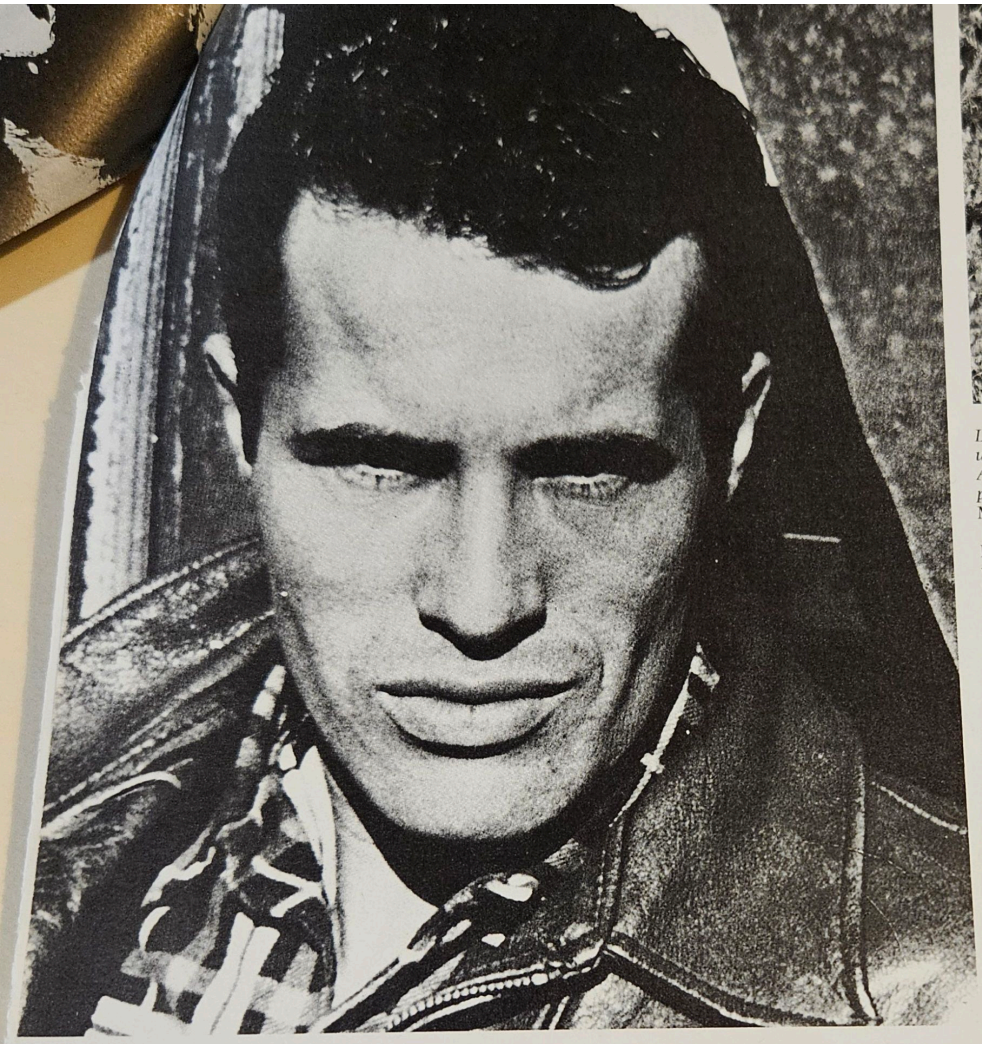
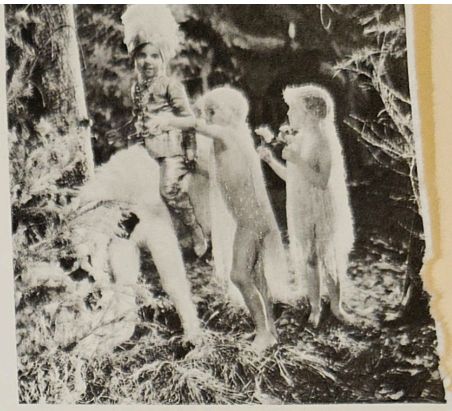




Left: Anger – the miscreant who wouldn't grow up – dressed in favourite leather-boy outfit. Above: his earliest screen appearance as a child prince riding around on a unicorn in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Anger Rising

Kenneth Anger has been in the forefront of the Underground film movement since he released his first film in 1947. From one point of view, his prominence is surprising: he has released only 9 films, none of them longer than 40 minutes, and he has never associated his work with any particular school or style of film-making

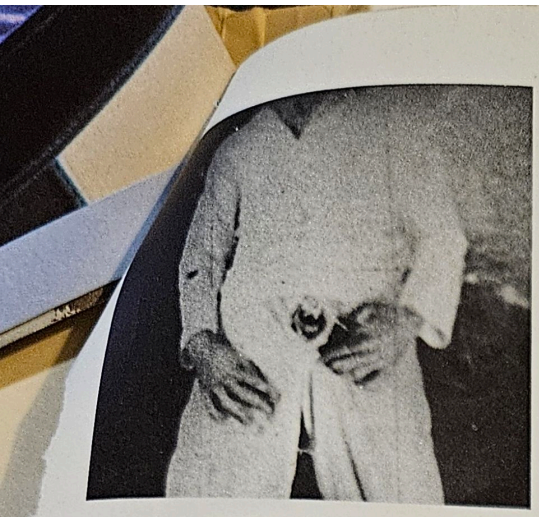
Although film-making was instituted as an industrial process in the United States earlier than anywhere else, there is a parallel tradition of non-commercial film-making in America that dates back at least to the Twenties. In the early years, it was known as 'film poetry'. When it acquired notoriety in the early Sixties, it was dubbed 'Underground film'. In the polemics of the late Sixties, it identified itself as 'New American Cinema'. Finally, in the all too placid Seventies, it gained academic respectability as 'the independent avant garde'. Both the films and the organizations around them have changed enormously over the years, but Kenneth Anger remains a unique figure – and not just in the American context.

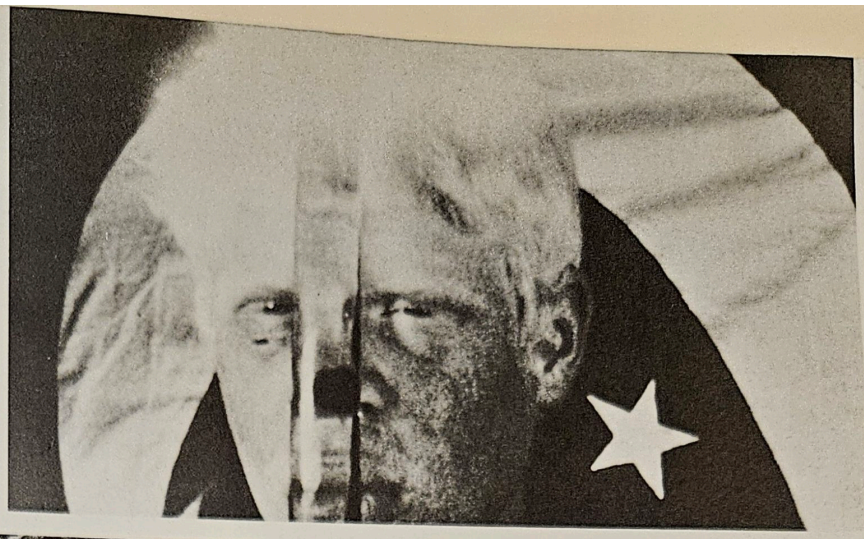
Anger was born in Los Angeles (into a European immigrant family) in 1930. There were two seminal influences on his childhood. The first was his grandmother, who had been a costume mistress in silent films, and who played a decisive role in forming the boy's tastes and interests, especially in occultism. The second was his appearance – at the age of five – in the Max Reinhardt-William Dieterle version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935). He played the Indian princeling, and spent the movie riding a unicorn and being seized alternately by Oberon and Titania. His upbringing in Hollywood was later acidly reflected in his book of scandals *Hollywood Babylon* (published 1975), first released in French as a series of articles in the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

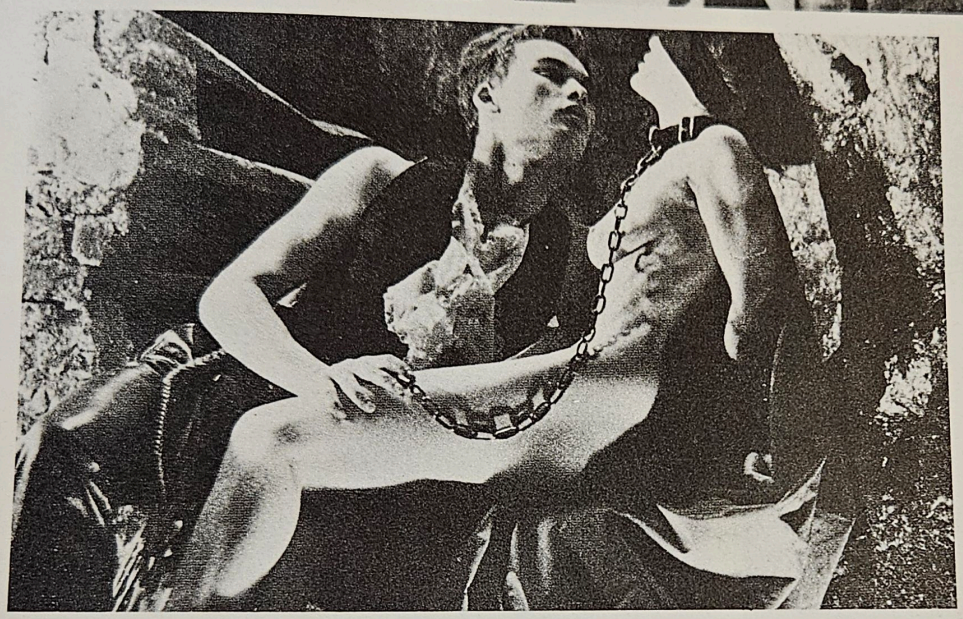
Playing with fire

He began making films at a very early age: he recalls shooting a version of *Ferdinand the Bull* with his troupe of cub-scouts at the age of seven. He continued making short films through his early teens, but it was not until he made *Fireworks* (1947) at the age of 17 that he seriously set about seeking an audience for his work. He found that audience not in America but in Europe: after submitting *Fireworks* to the Festival des Films Maudits in Biarritz in 1949, he received not a prize but a letter of warm encouragement from Jean Cocteau, who had sat on the Festival jury. Before long, he was travelling Europe, showing his films and trying to make new ones; he returned to California to shoot *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), but did not settle back in the United States until 1962. He has since divided his time between San Francisco, New York and London, and has spent the last decade working intermittently on a major film called *Lucifer Rising*, planned as his first feature.

Fireworks marked one of the most incandescent debuts of the post-war cinema. It is a psycho-drama – a form introduced to art and film circles in California by the film-maker Maya Deren – framed as a violent fable of homosexual initiation. Anger himself plays the lead, a young man who dreams of a rough encounter with a group of sailors, and emerges from the nightmare with a longed-for lover in







Above left: Fireworks – *pseudo-erotic macho high jinks where the sailor's penis turns into a sparkling firework. Above: a whiff of mystic ritualism from the occult movie* Invocation of My Demon Brother *(1969). Left:* The Story of O *(1959–61) borrows from Pauline Reage's novel of violent sexual sadism*

his bed. The film's sexual candour was striking for the period, and it remains shocking for many audiences today, but the film cannot be reduced to a 'mere' homosexual wish-fulfilment. Anger was indebted to Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930, *The Blood of a Poet*) for some of his imagery, and to Eisenstein's early films for some of his montage experiments, but the overall rhythms and cadences were original enough to make the film famous as a harbinger of a new generation of American independents.

Sexual symphonies

It was *Fireworks* which also introduced what was to become Anger's most enduring theme: the relationship between an individual and a group – often phrased as a fantasy of some sort – with the group ultimately being assimilated into the individual by some uniquely cinematic osmosis. This theme reappears in Anger's two best-known films, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* and *Scorpio Rising* (1963). *Pleasure Dome* is an extended fantasia about a party, where the polysexual host adopts a different persona (and costume) to welcome each of the guests. The guests, for their part, represent a heterogeneous set of mythologies – from Hollywood (a Marilyn blonde) to ancient Greece (the writer Anaïs Nin as Astarte) by way of German Expressionism (Cesare the somnambulist from *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*, 1919, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, played by director-to-be Curtis Harrington). *Scorpio Rising*, on the other hand, begins as a quasi-documentary on a Brooklyn motorcycle gang, and gradually turns into a bizarre Hallowe'en ritual which rhymes hero-worship with blasphemy, and speed with death. Scorpio, the solitary central character, is seen desecrating a church, and is contrasted successively with Brando (in *The Wild One*, 1953), Christ and Hitler. Intricate cross-cutting links him with a group of other bikers, one of whom finally crashes and dies, apparently at Scorpio's bidding.

Magic moments

The strong currents of fantasy and eroticism that run through these films come together in Anger's fascination with the 'sex Magick' of the English occultist Aleister Crowley, a renegade from 'The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn', who published copious volumes of occult lore. Anger has insisted in interviews that Crowley is central to his work; others might argue that the elements of occultism are peripheral to more substantial questions of sexuality, morality and culture.

Anger is half aesthete, half maker of popular culture. At their best, his films subversively tease out undercurrents in the society around him, while at the same time marking daring advances in film aesthetics. *Scorpio Rising* finds all manner of disquieting implications in its soundtrack of 1962 pop songs and its images of comic-strips, pin-ups and leather fetishism. *Puce Moment* (1949) sardonically takes the 'divinity' of a screen goddess of the Twenties literally, endowing the figure of Barbara La Marr with frivolous magic powers. *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953) is a brilliant variation on the celebrated cream-separator sequence from Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1928), which preserves the abstract visual poetry of the original while conjuring a half-hidden narrative from the movements of a solitary figure and the play of jets of water from fountains. *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965) has the last word on car fetishism with its images of a Californian blond polishing his prized hot-rod with a powder puff.

Growing Anger

Capsule descriptions of Anger's films risk making them sound pretentious or outlandish. Although consistently innovative, the films are never obscure: each is designed to work first and foremost as a sensual experience, articulated through colour, surreal juxtaposition and, above all, humour. Anger tirelessly reworks his films to heighten their impact or reassess their meaning. He has recently tightened *Scorpio Rising* from 31 minutes to 28. *Pleasure Dome* has been through many versions: it was shown in Brussels in 1959 with a 3-screen climax (on the lines of Abel Gance's *Napoléon*, 1927), and the current version (1966) accumulates layer upon layer of superimposition as it proceeds, to delirious effect. *Rabbit's Moon* (1970), a self-mocking fantasy about a young man's infatuation with a magic-lantern, was shot in the early Fifties in Paris as a *commedia dell'arte* fable, *La Lune des Lapins*, but finally turned into a wry parable about self-deception.

Lucifer Rising – when released – may well force a complete reappraisal of Anger's cinema. In the meantime, his short films stand as monuments to an independence of means, thought and strategy. In them, the power of imagination flies high. TONY RAYNS

Organ No. III 12/1970

ON ANGER

By Jack Flash (David Degner)

KENNETH ANGER has a bad name. An authentic *maudit,*— witness the material difficulties he has had to face in his filmmaking and the indifference, incomprehension, or faddish approval that often meets the films he has managed to make. Anger writes of himself, anonymously, that "No man is a prophet in his own land and among his own people . . . The herd (generally instigated by their shepherds!) have always resented pioneers and innovators. Anger is called 'the Most Monstrous Moviemaker in the Underground' by Americans in his own America. He wanders over the whole globe and finds only misunderstanding everywhere." He is right to insist. The (relatively) little writing about his work that does hit print tends either to be anecdotal *(e.g.,* "Anger's new film has a sound-track by *Mick Jagger!"* "Anger's new film stars *Bobby Beausoleil!")* or unenlighteningly personal *(e.g.,* "I don't understan' it but, man, it blows *my* mind!").

Nothing seems to excite quite as much interest and to prompt quite as much reaction as Anger's relation to the occult. I'm going to try to define the nature of his relation to the occult, to define its status within his work and life, and to replace the emphasis where it rightly belongs: on the films.

Anger has characterized his own role in life in these terms: "I am an artist working in light, and that's my whole interest, really." This self-definition nicely amplifies the simpler, more obvious statement, "Kenneth Anger makes films" — invented, neatly enough, by a man named Light (in one language, at least), Louis Lumiere. "That's my whole interest, really" — though Anger takes care to strew his path in life and film with the fussy and dubious clutter of the occult: its detail, its niceties, its fine and its finer points are legion, indeed. This detail is complex in its derivation and indefinite in its particular interrelation: one man's X is another man's Y — though he's still spelling it "X".

The particular occult with which Kenneth Anger identifies himself and his work is called Magick (capital M, little k) by its inventor, Aleistor Crowley. In the notice Anger wrote on himself for the press-book to the retrospective given his work at the Film-makers' Cinematheque in 1966, he records as his *"Lifework:* MAGICK", and as his *"Magical Weapon:* Cinematograph." In the Canadian film magazine *Take One,* Anger is reported to say that "as far as the occultist thing goes, I do follow the tenets of Aleister Crowley and have about the third largest collection of his books in the world. But I don't know how fanatical I am. . ." "My guru," Anger said just this year to an English underground paper, *Friends,* "is Aleister Crowley. I consider him one of the greatest Englishmen of all time, who has been completely misunderstood. [Need I remind you to note the echo.— J.F.] I am convinced his time will come; for his message is that we are all moving through into a new era and must wake up to it."

The identification Anger makes of his work with Magick involves him in identification with Crowley himself. One can sense that this identification obtains on the emotional level, even if one cannot detail it there. One can detail it on the intellectual level *via* Anger's deep-grained conviction that this "new era" is fast on its way if not already upon us; Anger formulates his sense of (coming and present) change in terms deriving from astrology. "In 1962," he told *Friends,* "we finally left the Piscean Age behind and moved into the Age of Aquarius." Five years ago, he was telling a Berkeley-based "sex, politics, international communism, drugs" *etc., etc.* magazine, *Spider,* that these ages last "two thousand years. The one that ended in 1962 was the Piscean Age, the Age of the Fish, which was the age of Jesus Christ. . . Where the Piscean Age was ruled by Neptune, planet of mysticism, the Aquarian Age was ruled by the planet Uranus, the most erratic planet of all. It's the sign of the unexpected — revolution, for one thing. And that doesn't mean revolution necessarily taking place in the streets, though it's that, too. But it's also revolution of inner space — man discovering himself."

Anger to *Spider:* "Everything's happening on schedule. That's what's so groovy. There was a stellium in 1962 . . . The Indian astrologers . . . predicted . . . the end of the world." They were mistaken, notes Anger, and happily so; happily, this stellar event marked something far more important than the end of a world: it marked "the end of an era, the era of the Jesus hang-up. And the new thing is happening right now. The last two thousand years were based on renunciation, sacrifice, and guilt. The fight for the next generation, the next twenty-five [or] fifty years,— just the beginning of the fight, really — is skimming off the shell that's left over from the last era: the idea of guilt associated with sexuality and also associated with social responsibility." Now, Crowley ("my guru") affirms (in the twenty-fourth "theorem" of *Magick in Theory and*

Practice) that "Every man has an indefeasible right to be what he is." This proposition is likely to win the active assent, the intense belief of any man who resists — or in the extremer cases who actively undertakes to destroy — the norms and the normality peculiar to his society.

Anger is such a man. He undertakes in and *via* his films to destroy (or, at the least, to disarm) what he sees in his society that he judges of senses to be wrong, repressive, regressive. But this is to view the aim in negative. To view it positively: he aims to liberate his society and its individual members from what checks, harms, and degrades them. In some final sense, of course, the distinction lacks real basis, for what has to be checked or destroyed in the society is local in its individual members, the persons whom he has undertaken to free. But as a matter of fact, it is precisely the final indifference to this distinction that just may explain the resistance that meets his work, the misunderstanding that "normally" greets him, the image he has of himself as one hunted or hounded, harassed and even persecuted, for such an aim is likely to make a man who chooses to think "liberation" as coming to bear on "sexuality and social responsibility" a pariah in this bourgeois society.

Film aside, now, I suggest that Anger's final aim is to destroy/liberate/reconstruct this society, at least in regard to the way(s) it relates to "sexuality and social responsibility." Magick is thus only the intermediate aim; in relation to the final aim, its status is the status of means in relation to end.

In choosing to identify his work in film with Magick, Anger acts both in defiance and by way of provocation. Anger has a taste or even a sympathy for what his peers — tastemakers! — would term cheap, trite, and vulgar. They seem not to notice, however, in what this implicates them and the judgments they pass. Crowley does. "In one sense," Crowley affirms, "Magick may be defined as the name given to Science by the vulgar." Elsewhere he flatly insists: Magick "is Science." He seems to be arguing that it is precisely this "vulgarity" that makes Magick "Science," for what is "vulgar" is quite literally "of the people": if this is false science, it is archetypally false, it is popular error.

If in some sense it is instinct that compels Anger to identify his work in film with Magick, the instinct nonetheless makes a perfect fit in terms of result with the conscious aim. For it is precisely the "vulgarity" of (at least some of) his tastes that assures Anger access to his viewers. The "vulgar" is another name for the simple, the unsophisticated; but this is the negative (tastemakers') view: viewed from the far side, it is the "unsophisticated" sensibility that is unencumbered, radical, root, real. Anger's flair for what is trite and cheap in his society is precisely what guarantees him a grasp on his society — or even a hold over it; and it is precisely at this point of contact that he can apply the pressure he means to bring most effectively.

Anger is as much an adept of film as he is an adept of Magick. His relation to the history of film is impeccable. "Melies has always been my mentor," he told *Friends;* "he showed how you could create a world of imagination with limited means and very little bread; his sets and costumes were just canvas and paper, but for me his trip to the moon is a thousand times more fabulous than *2001.* " Melies — a magician in a very literal sense (he "did magic" on stage for a living) — is Anger's "mentor" because his films show Anger not only that you don't have to have lots of money to create magic, but that in the degree that money may distract you from the material immediacy of "just canvas and paper" it's better if your means are limited — if it is magic that you mean to create. Anger has notoriously limited means. Melies shows Anger that what is disabling in Hollywood's terms is enabling for those who choose to resist them.

Anger honors Lumiere, too. "One of the most unknown filmmakers," he told *Friends,"* is Lumiere,